

The Age of Government by Great Dictators

Dynasties Have Gone and War Lords are the Idols in the Shrines of Europe

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The Great Dictators

“The more things change, the more they stay the same”, say the French.

Certainly the efforts at human government attempted by the various nations of the world very largely confirm this profound and challenging paradox.

Out of anarchy, indefinite, intolerable, and threatening to become interminable, sprang kings, given all power and almost God-like status.

Of course, the kings governed well, or misgoverned according to their circumstances and their characters. At any rate, they seemed far better than the hitherto unending anarchy and terror which had preceded them.

But the risk of entrusting the entire fortunes, not merely of a group of tribes, but of the great nations which developed under the kings to the accident of an individual birth, weighed heavily upon the spirit of mankind.

At one period Pericles or Augustus, at another Draco or Caligula!

After the old primeval anarchy had been suppressed society set itself to try, to restrain their king. They invented constitutions of many different types, designed to average the risks.

Here they might hamper a great law-giver, a prophet, a true leader of the race; there, on the other hand they fitted a strait-waistcoat on a monster, a crack-pate, an idiot, or perhaps only a worm.

Still, this doctrine of averaging risks by means of constitutions, and of keeping kings without returning to anarchy, became deeply engrained in

the people of a small island amid the northern mists who seemed to have a genius for common sense.

Out of it arose by many painful processes the famous English Parliamentary system and constitutional monarchy.

Under this the king reigns, but does not govern. He gathers and preserves all that is best in the nation. He embodies all its achievements. He is the heir of all its glories.

By a profound clairvoyance pomp was divorced from power and power was divided and sub-divided by Councillors of State and Parliamentary assemblies.

Promise of Victorian Days

The English conception wrought by the island nobility from the Magna Charta to the age of Anne, spread over wide portions of the globe. The forms were often varied, but the idea was the same.

Sometimes as in the United States, through historical incidents, an elected functionary replaced the hereditary king, but the idea of the separation of powers between the executive, the assemblies, and the courts of law spread widely throughout the world in what we must regard as the great days of the 19th Century.

All over Europe we saw Parliamentary systems coming into being, either crowned or uncrowned, which restrained the rulers and kept officials of all kinds in their place compared to the ordinary citizen, ploughman, artisan, artist, or thinker.

In the days of Queen Victoria it looked as if the world was going to settle down into a highly cultivated, peaceful society, capable of modern science and under whose sway there would be a continuous process of self-improvement and higher social organization. This process was accompanied by gigantic expansion both of population and wealth.

Victorian statesmen certainly thought they had reached sagacious final conclusions about government and economics.

However, underneath there had grown up an immense mass of people who understood nothing about the past and were highly discontented at the slow progress which they were making into the happier future.

The sinister 20th century dawned in unrest.

Then came terrible wars shattering great empires, laying nations low, sweeping away old institutions and ideas with a scourge of molten steel.

What is extraordinary about these wars it that the world emerged from them and all their waste of human life and treasure far larger and more vehemently active than ever before.

The wars fanned the wings of science brought to mankind a thousand blessings, a thousand problems, and a thousand perils.

Gone are the Dynasties

Democracy has been defined as “the association of us all in the leadership of the best”. In practice it does not always work this way.

Vast masses of people were invested with the decisive right to vote, while at the same time they had very little leisure to study the questions upon which they must pronounce; and an enormous apparatus for feeding them with propaganda, catchwords, and slogans came simultaneously into existence.

This combination of extraordinary conditions bid fair to reintroduce the age of anarchy.

Alike in fear of anarchy and in vague hopes of future comforts a very large proportion of Europe have yielded themselves to dictatorship.

Nations which had either driven out or confined within constitutional limits the old careful kingships of the past, made haste to rally in the parades and processions of a set of violent, wrathful, resourceful, domineering figures cast up by the bloody surge of war and its cruel lacerating recoil.

We have entered the age of the dictators. The dynasties of the Romanoffs, the Hohenzollerns, the Hapsburgs, the Bourbons, with all their immemorial tradition and re-embodiment of the treasurers of the past, are gone. Even the Sultan has gone from Constantinople.

New idols are worshipped in the shrines of Europe; new unshackled war lords have imposed themselves upon its peoples.

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Let us have a look at these figures who now yield ten times the power of the old kings with none of their restraints of constitution, tradition or dynastic outlook.

A Do or Die Mussolini: Fascism Born Like A Thunderclap: Never the Same Again

The world can never be the same after Mussolini. Until he appeared the whole movement of revolutionary thought and Socialism was international and trended towards the Left.

Every violent demagogue was always afraid of being outbid by some other agitator who would go further and cared little if his country fared worse.

If one declared he would turn the world upside down, another could cap him by promising to turn it inside out.

Progressive society had got on to the slippery slope.

Great thinkers assumed far too readily that progress could only take place in one direction; from Liberalism to Radicalism; from Radicalism to Socialism; from Socialism to Communism, and so on to the highest ranges of sterile, destructive thought.

The Bolshevik revolution which had laid Russia low shook the world on the morrow of the Great War.

Millions of men, trained to arms, to whom slaughter was routine, poured back into every country, visitors, and vanquished alike looking for something new.

And here was Russian Bolshevism and the dictatorship of the proletariat, promising a Topia by the simple process of killing the landlords, the capitalists and the employers, and having everything managed by officials.

This fever threatened to spread beyond the bounds of semi-Asiatic Russia.

By a supreme effort defeated Germany threw it off. It menaced Italy with mortal danger.

Everywhere in Italy one read scrawled upon the walls “W Lenin,” meaning “Eviva Lenin.” The Royal and Parliamentary Government of Italy would make no head against this tide.

Mussolini’s Rise to Power—A Patriot’s Rise to Power

Everywhere in the streets and villages Communist bullies murdered their political opponents and terrorized the mass of the population.

The workmen seized the factories and tried to work them, not even for the benefit of the community, but as private properties of their own. Disorganization spread through every walk of life and every service of the State. The name of Italy was despised by the Italian people.

Officers in uniform were insulted whenever they appeared, pulled out of trains and belaboured. The trains themselves ceased to run with any reference to punctuality.

The national flag was spat upon. It looked as if “W Lenin” was coming into his own.

Then, suddenly, a few hundred men, taking their lives in their hands, challenged all this squalid and ferocious truculence.

They struck back. They entered the streets and confronted the Communists, read to die and resolute to kill.

At the head of this forlorn band appeared an ex-Socialist journalist, who was also an ardent Italian patriot, severely wounded in the war.

The story is familiar. In the twinkling of an eye, almost by a thunderclap, Fascism was born.

Mussolini, buoyed up by the Italian love of country, and armed by the traditions of ancient Rome, found himself at the head of millions of men, many of whom six months before had scrawled “W Lenin “ on the walls and now as gladly scrawled “W Mussolini.”

He marched to Rome, where the constitutional king, but yesterday the butt of Communist malevolence, welcomed him with discreet satisfaction.

The Rebuilding of Italy

The first Fascist State was born. The world had learned that Democracy, taken in the right way at the right moment by the right man, could just as easily be led to the Right as to the Left.

I am very glad that nothing like this happened in our country. I should be very sorry to live under a Fascist regime. It would be tolerable only if the sole alternative was Bolshevism. But we in our island have something which, judged by every test of freedom or prosperity, is superior to Fascism.

We govern ourselves under the aegis of a constitutional monarchy. We have our old laws.

We have our traditions, and for many generations we have walked into the future guided by the hard-won wisdom of the past.

In Italy, however, the arrival of Mussolini at the summit of power changed the whole mood and position of the Italian people.

All, almost all, set to work with enthusiasm to build up the greatness of their country. Authority was respected. The flag, so lately trampled under foot, was hoisted by triumphant and all-powerful hands.

The trains ran punctually. The beggars disappeared. The taxi-drivers presented themselves shaved, civil and eager to conduct the foreigners around the famous monuments of the Eternal City. Everyone individually felt proud to be an Italian.

Nothing like this transformation had ever been seen in the secular history of the world.

All the plastic crowds, which might so easily have been regimented under the hammer and sickle of Asiatic Communism, were rallied in multitudinous assemblies under the fasces and symbols of ancient Rome.

Liberty was lost, but Italy was saved.

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The Test of Sixteen Years

All the world wondered how this ex-Socialist, ex-journalist, ex-Service man, Mussolini would stand the supreme test of dictatorial power.

When, presently, it was seen that he could make a concordat with the Pope about religion, and an arrangement with Soviet Russia about trade. It was evident that here was a man who was the ruler of slogans and not their slave.

But again they asked would be last? All this happened in 1920. We are new at the beginning of 1937 and Mussolini is still the master of the life of the Italian people, and never more honoured or strictly obeyed than now.

It would be a dangerous folly for the British people to underrate the enduring position in world-history which Mussolini will hold; or the amazing qualities of courage, comprehension, self-control, and perseverance which he exemplifies.

We are very glad, however, that he rules in Italy and not in England.

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Europe's Man of Destiny: How will Adolf Hitler Use His Power?

It is not possible to form a just judgment of a public figure who has attained the enormous dimensions of Adolph Hitler until his life work as a whole is before us.

Although no subsequent political action can condone wrong deed or remove the guilt of blood, history is replete with examples of men who have risen to power by employing stern, grim, wicked, and even frightful methods, but who, nevertheless, when their life is revealed as a whole, have been regarded as great figures whose lives have enriched the story of mankind.

So it may be with Hitler.

Time Alone Will Tell

Such a final view is not vouchsafed to us today. We cannot tell whether Hitler will be the man who will once again let loose upon the world another war in which modern civilization will irretrievably succumb, or whether he will go down in history as the man who restored honour and peace of mind to the great Germanic nation, and brought them back serene, helpful, and strong, to the European family circle.

It is on this mystery of the future that history will pronounce Hitler either a monster or a hero.

It is this which will determine whether he will rank in Valhalla with Pericles, with Augustus, and with Washington, or welter in the inferno of human scorn with Attila and Tamerlane.

It is enough to say that both possibilities are open at the present moment.

If, because the story is unfinished, because, indeed, its most fateful chapters have yet to be written, we are forced to dwell upon the dark side of his work and creed, we must never forget nor cease to hope for the bright alternative.

Adolf Hitler was the child of the rage and grief of a mighty empire and race who had suffered overwhelming defeat in war.

He it was who exorcised the spirit of despair from the German mind by substituting the not less baleful but far less morbid spirit of revenge.

When the terrible German armies, which had held half Europe in their grip, recoiled on every front and sought armistice from those upon whose lands even then they still stood as invaders: when the pride and will-power of the Prussian race broke into surrender and revolution

behind the fighting lines: when that Imperial Government which had been for more than 50 fearful months the terror of almost all nations, collapsed ignominiously, leaving its loyal, faithful subjects defenseless and disarmed before the wrath of the sorely-wounded victorious Allies, then it was that one Austrian corporal, a former house-painter, set out to regain all.

Germany Tomorrow

In the 15 years that have followed this resolve he has succeeded in restoring Germany to the most powerful position in Europe, and not only has he restored the position of his country, but he has even, to a very large extent, reversed the results of the Great War.

Sir John Simon, as Foreign Secretary, said in Berlin that he made no distinction between victors and vanquished.

Such distinctions indeed still exist, but the vanquished are in process of becoming the victors, and the victors the vanquished.

When Hitler began, Germany lay prostrate at the feet of the Allies. He may yet see the day when what is left of Europe will be prostrate at the feet of Germany.

Whatever else may be thought about these exploits, they are certainly among the most remarkable in the whole history of the world.

Here is no place to tell that tale. Its main episodes are well known.

The riotous meetings, the bloody fusillade at Munich, Hitler's imprisonment, his various arrests and trials, his conflict with Hindenburg, his electoral campaign, von Papen's tergiversation, Hitler's conquest of Hindenburg, Hindenburg's desertion of Bruening—all of these were the milestones upon that indomitable march which carried the Austrian corporal to the life-dictatorship of the entire German nation of nearly seventy million souls, constituting the most industrious, capable, fierce, militaristic and resentful race in the world.

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He had only to Press the Button

Hitler arrived at the supreme power in Germany at the head of a National Socialist movement which wiped out all the states and old kingdoms of Germany and fused them into one whole.

At the same time, Nazidom suppressed and obliterated by force, wherever necessary, all other parties in the State.

At this very moment he found that the secret organization of German industry and aviation, which the German General Staff, and latterly the Bruening Government, had built up, was in fact absolutely ready to be put into operation.

So far, no one had dared to take this step. Fear that the Allies would intervene and nip everything in the bud had restrained them.

But Hitler had risen by violence and passion; he was surrounded by men as ruthless as he.

It is probable that, when he overthrew the existing constitutional Government of Germany, he did not know how far they had prepared the ground for his action; certainly he has never done them the justice to recognize their contribution to his success.

He even drove the patriotic Bruening, under threat of murder, from German soil.

The fact remains that all he and Goering had to do was to give the signal for the most gigantic process of secret rearmament that has ever taken place.

He had long proclaimed that if he came into power he would do two things that no one else could do for Germany but himself.

First, he would restore Germany to the height of her power in Europe, and secondly, he would cure the cruel unemployment that afflicted the people.

Adolf Hitler the Man—A Nation Goes War-Minded

His methods are now apparent. Germany was to recover her place in Europe by rearming, and the Germans were directed to preparations for war, not only in the factories, in the barracks, and on the aviation grounds, but in the schools, the colleges, and almost in the nursery by every resource of State power and modern propaganda; and the preparation and education of the whole people for war-readiness was undertaken.

What manner of man is the grim figure who has performed these superb toils and loosed these frightful evils?

Does he still share the passions he has evoked?

Does he, in the full sunlight of worldly success at the head of the great nation he has raised from the dust, still feel racked by the hatreds

and antagonisms of his desperate struggle; or will they be discarded like the armour and the cruel weapons of strife under the mellowing influences of success? Evidently a burning question for men of all nations!

Those who have met Herr Hitler face to face in public business or on social terms have found a highly competent, cool, well-informed functionary with an agreeable manner, a disarming smile, and few have been unaffected by a subtle personal magnetism.

Nor is this impression merely the dazzle of power. He exerted it on his companions at every stage in his struggle, even when his fortunes were in the lowest depths.

Thus the world lives on; hopes that the worst is over, and that we may yet live to see Hitler a gentler figure in a happier age.

Meanwhile, he makes speeches to the nations which are characterized by candour and moderation.

Recently he has offered many words of reassurance, eagerly lapped up by those who have been so tragically wrong about Germany in the past.

Only time can show, but, meanwhile, the great wheels revolve; the rifles, the cannon, the tanks, the shot and shells, the air-bombs, the poison-gas cylinders, the aeroplanes, the submarines, and now the beginnings of a fleet, flow in ever-broadening streams from the already largely war-mobilized arsenals and factories of Germany.

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Lenin—Trotsky—Stalin

The scene now shifts to Moscow. The stage is filled by an astounding society of political doctrinaires. Here is the priesthood of a religion where there is no God.

There is, however, a shrine. It is the tomb of Lenin.

There the ceaseless procession of pilgrims may gaze upon the discoloured lineaments of the most successful of all human destroyers.

The career of Lenin is the acme of paradox. Even Napoleon scarcely produced such widespread and vital effects.

The impact of Lenin upon the human race was more devastating and far more long-lasting than that of the great Corsican.

But the curious fatality which pursued Lenin was that all his plans produced results the direct opposite to his intentions.

He wished to save the world. All he could do was to blow some of it up.

He wished to abolish poverty. He only succeeded in abolishing wealth.

The most disastrous day for Russia was that on which he was born. The next most disastrous was that on which he died.

Before he could rebuild he had to overturn. After he had overturned he had neither strength nor time to rebuild.

He wished to bequeath the empire he had gained to Trotsky. In fact, it was Stalin who laid strong hands upon the inheritance.

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After the Revolution

Stalin was one of Lenin's followers, his comrade, and finally his chief lieutenant.

In his youth and prime he was a fervent Communist. Against Mensheviks or moderate revolutionist, he stood as a Bolshevik or whole-nogger.

When the Bolsheviks at a London conference decided against active terrorism, viz. murder, Stalin revolted against them.

Fearful deeds were done. Bombs in Tiflis in 1907 laid fifty persons low; but a very large sum of money was what was called in Communist circles "expropriated" for Communist purposes from the Government mail van.

Under the comparatively easy rule of the Tsars, Stalin, repeatedly arrested, passed long terms in Siberia, whence he seems to have been able to escape whenever he wished.

After the Bolshevik revolution had established itself upon the ruins of old Russia, Stalin emerged as "General Secretary of the Communist Party."

He ran to caucus. He managed the committees. He carried through the business which the statesmen of Bolshevism, Trotsky and others, had in mind.

Faithfully he served Lenin, but as Lenin declined under successive strokes of paralysis towards his glass-fronted coffin, Stalin lost his favour.

In his final testament, written a few weeks before his death, the idolized arch-pope of Bolshevism set down his adverse opinion of Stalin in terms scathing to the world in general, but specially injurious when addressed to the peculiar sect of Communism.

He is Still the “Tsar”

But Stalin survived this solemn condemnation. When the world-figure politicians of the Soviet were debating their schemes for world revolution, the general secretary, or caucus manager, suddenly took personal charge.

Trotsky was banished, Kameneff, Zinovieff, and half-a-dozen others, after ten years' alternations and grovellings were shot (or are said to have been shot) in the Lubyanka Prison.

Stalin remains at this moment the general secretary or Tsar of all the Russias, to face with the mighty Russian army the hungry enmity of Germany and Japan.

In the governing circles of Germany at the present time they are very anxious about Stalin's health.

He is said to be suffering from angina pectoris. But no one can say for certain.

He has certainly had a great career, and one which luckily for us was a long way off our island.

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There is only one dictator more in Europe worthy of mention at the present time. He is the ruler of Turkey

Mustapha Kemal has ruled for more than 15 years with absolute, unquestioned power.

He has made the Turks abandon their dearest traditions. He has made them write in Latin characters instead of Turkish.

He has made them wear billycock hats so that the brim prevents them in their devotions from pressing their foreheads against the soil as enjoined by the Prophet Mohammed.

He has forced the women out of the harems and given them votes, much to their embarrassment. He has set up a Parliament.

He almost succeeded in organizing an official opposition, but this broke down in practice.

After the leaders had wound up the debate and abused each other in the most hearty terms, they were made to walk out of the House, arm in arm, to a friendly dinner on the British model.

Their followers, however, continued the debate with rising ardour, and three corpses were carried from the Chamber before it ended.

This attempt to organize opposition to himself must be regarded as almost the only failure of Mustapha Kemal in his long leadership of Turkey.

In every other respect he has had his own way.

A Soldier of Genius

Mustapha Kemal Ataturk differs from all the other dictators by being a soldier of genius who has risen by the hardest fighting and the most brilliant achievements in the field, and gained, rank by rank, the unswerving devotion of the warlike Turks.

He it was who beat us at the Dardanelles, both at the original landing in April, and at the battle of Suvia Bay in August.

He it was who raised Turkey from the forlorn plight to which she had fallen at the end of the Great War, who expelled the Greeks from Asia Minor, and with every attribute of genius and sagacity preserved the vital strength of the once great Ottoman Empire.

No one can say I have not tried to do justice to these dictators. Let us hope they will rule mercifully and wisely in their dominions and that the Liberal democracies of France and Great Britain will be well enough armed to transact our own affairs, to talk with them or about them without fear.